

# Part Five

Friday, August 22, 2003

## Coming home with losses healed

By COURTNEY PEIFER

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

SEOUL -- The Kims are a family of secrets.

A new layer unfolds each day and I wonder what I would learn if I had more time here. But I am glad that I am going home to the United States -- even as I fight to understand the meaning of home.

I had expected to feel like a foreigner here, to find a sense of my Americanism. Instead, I found comfort and ease in being Korean.



Meryl Schenker / P-I

I spent an afternoon wandering the streets of Seoul alone. I know just enough Korean to get myself into trouble, so I bowed slightly and smiled at the beckoning vendors. I walked past restaurant after restaurant in the Dongdaemun neighborhood and my mouth salivated as I took in the sharp smell of kimchi. I knew I would turn the corner, beyond the fruit vendor under the rainbow-striped umbrella and the printing shops and the bakery, and the luggage shop would be there.

I know to dodge crowds on the left side. I know when I go into stores, security guards will not follow me and clerks will not avoid helping me -- as they do in the United States -- because I look different. Here, it is features like mine that appear on billboards, in magazines, on TV.

But a sense of belonging goes beyond commercial images. It connects to the land, feasting from the Earth as I sank my fingers into the gooey seafloor to collect clams. It connects to memories of childhood: an orphanage, my grandfather's house, sleeping on the floor. It connects to a legacy held in the embrace of my father's chestnut trees.

"You can go back," Mom said. "Tell your story and let people know that it's possible to return."

What I discovered, however, was how important it was that I return -- not only to better understand myself, but to connect a broken link for my relatives. Lindsay and I have healed a loss and completed a home.

And now it was time to go home to another waiting family to fill in the blanks of our three-week separation from them, to whom I had also inherited a deeper sense of belonging.

"I've never believed in magic as much as I do now," Lindsay

said. "It's amazing the outpouring of love we are getting from all over the world, (American) relatives reaching out to us who never have before and whom I never reached out to before."

I realized that I had wandered into a love story. I was humbled by the kindness of strangers and carried by the love Lindsay and I received from friends and family from all over the world -- California, New Mexico, Georgia, Minnesota, Washington, Arizona, New York, Maryland, Ohio, Colorado, Washington, D.C., Hawaii, Michigan, Louisiana, Texas, The Netherlands, China, and of course Korea.

"I miss hearing your voices," Mom e-mailed.

I have missed hers -- Lindsay and I usually talk to her every day. And there are other things I have missed: my independence, my space, my solitude -- all of which come at a price in Korea.

I am an introvert. I require quiet moments to process experiences and contemplate choices. After 10 days of non-stop activity -- often sleeping only a couple of hours a night -- and non-stop chatter, I was yearning for a moment alone.

Later, I made my escape in the shadows of the temples surrounding South Korea's tallest Buddha -- 109 feet high -- in Daegu, about five hours south of Seoul.

I slipped into the bamboo forest, making my way around the slender stalks until I saw a clearing. Strung up in the bamboo was a 6-foot rubber drum. I tapped, and it made a dull thud. I beat it with the bottom of my fist, but still only a dull thud. I spotted a fallen branch nearby, but a different sound caught my attention. It was the sound of water -- the river quickly cutting through the mountain.



Meryl Schenker / P-I

Courtney, Lindsay and Jong Seong ride the subway in Seoul. For Courtney, the feeling of belonging she found in Korea goes beyond shared features to include family, culture and history.

I found a trail and I raced to the water below, only stopping when I was perched on the slick rocks at the water's edge. I washed my hands and slowly raised my fingers to my mouth, unable to resist the temptation to taste just a few drops, so cold and pure.

And then I ran back, slamming my feet into the soft earth as the ruffle of my dress danced around my knees and my heart pounded, exhilarated at the demand. I ran and ran, up the mountainside, past the silent drum and the sea of bamboo, returning to the world as if stepping out of a magical wardrobe.

I bowed reverently at the startled temple patrons, and then rushed past them as well, responding to a new sound, the call of my name -- my Korean one.

"Sun! Sun!"

"Here," I called back.

Kunnoppa, Korean for oldest brother, was the first to start looking for me.

"Sun? Sun?" Jong Seong asked my sister when he could no longer see me.

"I don't know where she is," Lindsay said.

He wandered the grounds, approaching Lindsay again. "Sun? Sun?"

Soon, Kunnoppa had asked our whole group whether they had seen me.

"Where have you been? Everyone has been looking for you," Lindsay said when I emerged.

I pointed at the forest and looked as the members of my group searched temple to temple. I had been gone only 15 minutes.

I am not used to having such close tabs kept on me, having a search party launched when I go to get coffee by myself.

"Very American?" Jong Seong asked Lindsay about my independence.

I do not understand being led by the wrist or being forced to walk under an umbrella when I am wearing a hooded waterproof jacket. I do not anticipate their chagrin when I stop to help four men -- two Australians, a Briton and a New Zealander -- huddled around a subway map.

The men were in Seoul on a one-night layover before joining an oil surveying rig in Russia. After I helped them plan their day -- Doksu palace and its museum, shopping at Dongdaemun or Namdaemun, a tea house in Insadong and Apeujong's night life -- and showed them which subway lines to take, I returned to my sister and brother's disapproving looks. Then I remembered that I'm in a culture protective of single women.

But these moments of dissonance are just opportunities to find my own way as I navigate through a different culture and a different family.

I have discovered home in the strength of my brothers' shoulders, in the grip of their embrace. I have discovered there are no boundaries on family, no statute of limitations on love.

I also have discovered the Kims are a family of fiery tempers.

"Kim family? No, we're the Kimchi family," joked Jong Seong, comparing our family to the spicy side dish.

We speak in terms of either love or anger. Jong Seong brings a



Meryl Schenker / P-I

After visiting Lt. Kwon Teh-il to say thank you for finding their family, Courtney and Lindsay visit a Buddhist temple.

story of both. But it's more than just a story, it is a confession.

"I was drinking by myself by the Han River," he said less than 36 hours before my departure. "My heart is breaking."

"Your heart is big, Oppa," I said, using the Korean title for older brother.

"When I was younger, my heart was big," Oppa said. "But now it grows smaller and smaller."

"No, Oppa. Your heart is still big," I said.

He was quiet for a few seconds and said, "I am sorry."

I was incredulous. He is the one who tries the hardest to communicate, to listen and to get to know his sisters. He has spent nearly every day with us.

"I am the family boss," he said. "I studied English in high school, but it's been 22 years since I've spoken it."

He was right. There are many things left unsaid because we can't communicate certain complexities without a shared language. But he is not to blame.

"We can't speak Korean," Lindsay said.

"No one knew that we'd ever find you," I said. "It's not your fault."

"Blameless," Lindsay showed him in the electronic dictionary. "You are blameless."

But years of guilt, of blame -- of perhaps shame -- are difficult to erase.

The Kims are a family of farmers, of fishermen, of laborers. Even today, my uncles have lean, defined muscles developed by decades of the earth's physical demands. And Korea is a society based on patriarchy, on men being protectors, on strength.

Brother, the first born, was healthy and strong through his first winter. But by summer, it was apparent that something was wrong with his left arm. Grandfather paid what little money they had on a hospital, but nothing cured his arm.

His shoulder stopped growing and his arm has so little strength that he still can't raise it above his shoulder. Most likely it was polio. But was it taken as an omen for the family?

Jong Seong blames himself for contributing to the family's poverty; for not being able -- despite being a child -- to help support the family after our father died; for not being strong enough to prevent his sisters from being given up.



Meryl Schenker / P-I

Myeong-dong-gil lane, a fashion center, has many Western chain stores, including Seattle's Best Coffee, in the heart of

He also blames himself for not receiving the love of our mother.

"Mother never calls me, never says, 'I love you. I love you.' But Sun, Soon come to Korea and she calls and calls to try to get together with you; it's, 'I love you, 'I love you, ' " he says, pointing to Lindsay and me.

Withholding affection from my brothers, she embraced Lindsay and me as prodigal daughters. However, Lindsay and I allowed only limited visits with her to appease our siblings, who yearned for an idyllic reunion. But, for me, this reunion could not be about reclaiming a childhood, long unrecoverable; it was about claiming links from the past to take into the future.



Meryl Schenker / P-I

A woman sells vegetables on the street in Seoul, a common sight. Vendors line the streets and each usually specializes in one food: squid, meat, fruits and vegetables.

My brother also focused on the future -- but the kind in which days are counted in hours, in which his sisters would be leaving.

"My heart is breaking," he repeated, crying silent tears.

Lindsay bowed before him, sobbing. And the three of us held each other.

"No, no," I said, quickly looking in the Korean-English dictionary. I found the word I was looking for and showed it to Jong Seong.

"Beginning," I said. "This is just the beginning. The beginning. We will see you again."

I repeated it over and over until we are smiling.

This is the beginning. It is no longer an impossible dream. And that has been my greatest discovery: I do not need to believe in the impossible; more things are possible than I ever believed.

## TELL US YOUR STORIES

Courtney Peifer's series has produced an outpouring of response from readers. If you have an adoption experience you would like to pass along, e-mail it to [adoption@seattlepi.com](mailto:adoption@seattlepi.com). We'll share the best of them with you.

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## Help for adoptees

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER STAFF

Organizations, support groups and other forums for Korean adoptees:

**National Adoption Information Clearinghouse:** NAIC is a resource on all aspects of adoption as a service of a branch of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 330 C St. S.W., Washington, D.C. 20447; 703-352-3488 or 888-251-0075 Fax: 703-385-3206 [www.calib.com/naic/pubs/ir\\_kores.cfm](http://www.calib.com/naic/pubs/ir_kores.cfm)

**Coalition for Asian American Children and Families:** A New York-based organization that supports Asian American children and families by advocating for social policies and programs and gives service providers culturally sensitive training and resources. 120 Wall St., 3rd floor, New York, NY 10005; 212-809-4675 [www.cacf.org/](http://www.cacf.org/)

**Global Overseas Adoptees' Link:** G.O.A.'L is an independent homebase for Overseas Adopted Koreans in their birth country run by adoptees and native Koreans. K.P.O. Box 1364, Seoul, Korea; 110-61382+2-337-2107 [www.goal.or.kr](http://www.goal.or.kr)

**International Concerns for Children:** ICC publishes the Report on Intercountry Adoption, a guidebook to international adoption and U.S. agencies working in specific foreign countries. 911 Cypress Dr., Boulder, CO; 80303; 303-494-8333 [www.icc.adopt.org](http://www.icc.adopt.org)

**Joint Council on International Children's Services:** The oldest and largest affiliation of licensed, non-profit international adoption agencies in the world. JCICS membership includes parent groups, advocacy organizations, and individuals who have an interest in international adoption. 1320 19th St. N.W., Suite 200, Washington, D.C.; 20036; 202-429-0400 [www.jcics.org](http://www.jcics.org)

**Korean-American Adoptee/Adoptive Family Network:** Information and resources for Korean and Korean American adoptees, people interested in adopting from Korea and families with children adopted from Korea. P.O. Box 5585, El Dorado Hills, CA 95762; 915-933-1447 [www.KAANet.com](http://www.KAANet.com)

**AKConnection (Adopted Korean Connection):** A support network for Minnesota Korean adoptees and their families. 12676 74th Ave. N., Maple Grove, MN, 55369 [www.akconnection.com/](http://www.akconnection.com/)

**Asian Adult Adoptees of Washington:** AAAW provides mentoring, fellowship and educational opportunities for adoptees of Asian descent and the community.  
5415 136th Place S.E., Bellevue, WA 98006; 425-649-9851  
E-mail: aaawashington@hotmail.com

**U.S. State Department International Adoption (Korea) Web site:** Contains information on the policy and procedures of adopting from Korea.  
[travel.state.gov/adoption\\_korea.html](http://travel.state.gov/adoption_korea.html)  
Korean Adoptee Homepage: Information on support for Korean adoptees.  
[www.adoptee.com](http://www.adoptee.com)

**Korean Quarterly:** An online magazine of Korean culture and information.  
[www.koreanquarterly.org/](http://www.koreanquarterly.org/)

**Korean Quarterly:** Publication of a non-profit organization to promote Korean American people, issues and culture.  
Subscription is \$12 per year.  
P.O. Box 6789, St. Paul, MN, 55106; 651-771-8164  
Korean Web Weekly: A Web site on all things Korean.  
[www.kimsoft.com/Korea.htm](http://www.kimsoft.com/Korea.htm)

**Sae Jong Camp:** A camp for Korean American adoptees.  
[www.sequoianet.com/saejong](http://www.sequoianet.com/saejong)

SOURCE: National Adoption Information Clearinghouse

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## Short Takes: Stair masters

I initially wondered how everyone stays so thin in Korea with so much tasty food. Then I hit the subway.

The subway connects much of South Korea and is easy and convenient to use. Signs are marked in English and Korean and each exit includes a neighborhood map.

As simple as the subway is to navigate, it takes some effort. Walk down four flights of at least 12 stairs each to get to the subway level. Take two more flights down to get to the tickets. One or two more flights down to get to the train.

Need to transfer? Take 48 steps up to the transfer level and perhaps a flight of stairs back down to your train. We'd usually transfer one to three times per trip.

Reach your destination? Four flights back up to street level.

But if you misread the maps, which was often my experience, hike back down the stairs, find the way through the subway tunnels to the right direction and hike back up the stairs.

Pedestrians can't cross many of the streets because roads are often congested. Thus, stair master your way back underground and pop back up on the opposite side of the street.

Easily 150 steps. Repeat for return trip.

What's astounding about all of this is that Koreans master all these steps in sandals, slides, mules, pumps and the most delicate of high heels. I stuck with my foamy-soled walking shoes or my Nikes.

As a Seattleite, I'm used to seeing Starbucks on seemingly every block -- or even every half block for that matter. Even in Seoul, the large green letters seemed commonplace amid the flash of other Western giants: KFC, McDonalds, Burger King.

But walking in Insadong, a neighborhood in north central Seoul, the green Starbucks letters stopped me. I recognized the logo on the door, but the letters above it jarred me. And then made me smile.

The letters were in Korean. It's the only Starbucks in the world -- among more than 6,500 branches in 30 countries -- in which the storefront sign is in the native language.

-- Courtney Peifer